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Brexit, the Left Behind and the Let Down: The Political Abstraction of ‘the Economy’ and the UK’s EU Referendum

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**Brexit, the Left Behind and the Let Down:
The Political Abstraction of 'the Economy' and the UK's EU Referendum**

Abstract

UK voters' decision to overturn the country's European Union membership has left most parliamentarians looking rather distant from the constituents they represent. The politicians staked much on assuming that people would not vote to sabotage their economic self-interest, but this message conspicuously failed to resonate. When politicians spoke in abstract terms about the needs of 'the economy', significant numbers understood this to mean labour market conditions that have personally served them badly. It has been commonplace since the referendum to refer to these people as the 'left behind'. However, they might more usefully be described as the 'let down'. Since the restructuring of the UK economy in line with global competitiveness norms they have been required to earn their rights as citizens through demonstrating their work readiness. Yet hard work on its own is now no longer sufficient for so many people to receive the rewards promised under the terms of the new social contract. They have been largely abandoned to their fate by the politicians as labour market segmentation has led to a significant expansion of the in-work poor. These people voted in large numbers against continued EU membership. This suggests that the referendum result can be seen at least in part as a revolt against the way in which the abstraction of 'the economy' has informed UK politics in recent decades.

Keywords

EU referendum; left behind; let down; globalisation; new social contract; credibility

Introduction

Leave voters will have had their own reasons for rejecting continued membership of the European Union, but it is still interesting just how far this flew in the face of received economic wisdom. The polling organisation Populus has calculated that only around one-in-three voters were ever feasible targets during the referendum campaign itself, with the rest having made up their minds well in advance. The factor most likely to persuade those 'in play' to vote Remain was apparently if they perceived Brexit as directly compromising their personal economic well-being (Nye, 2016, p.10). However, the combined words of the Government, the Treasury, the Bank of England, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, the World Trade Organization, the Confederation of British Industry, the Trades Union Congress, all mainstream opposition parties and pretty much every academic economist evidently came to naught in this regard. They all warned that Brexit would be disruptive to personal economic aspirations, and they were all pretty much ignored. Conventional common sense amongst election watchers has had it for thirty years and more that as long as the British public could clearly identify which option best satisfied its future economic interests then, in aggregate, that is the way it would vote. On June 23rd, though, this assumption was overturned, and really rather spectacularly so.

The economy *did* matter to the EU referendum result, I want to suggest, but decidedly not in this manner. The campaign showed that there are a substantial number of people who do not respond positively to being told to do what is best for the economy because the economy is not something they feel does right by them. There is an important distinction in this regard between 'the economy' (in inverted commas) as a political abstraction and the economy (in plain text) as an arena for real-life experiences. In the former guise we are repeatedly assured that 'the economy' is something to be carefully cultivated and cherished, to be honoured and celebrated when it ticks along nicely and protected and saved when the forecast is less rosy. However, the Leave campaign appears to have gained overwhelming support from people whose lives have clearly got harder as economic opportunities in the areas in which they grew up have largely disappeared and who, as a consequence, have little or no confidence in their future economic prospects. Research undertaken by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has shown that Leave voters were twice as likely to believe that their area has been excluded from recent national economic successes and also twice as likely to blame politicians for that fact (Wright and Case, 2016). For them, the forecast always appears gloomy. These are people for whom rejoicing at the news that 'the economy' is successful seems to be other people revelling in riches they assume will never be theirs to share, and for whom rescuing 'the economy' appears to involve talk of sacrifices that all-too-quickly land at their door.

It is these people that I want to consider in the pages that follow. They represent admittedly only a single Leave-voting constituency amongst many, but it is one that very quickly after the result was announced had the evocative label of the 'left behind' imposed upon it. These are people who feel largely abandoned by the political process as they have been left to their own devices to cope with the cumulative effects of forty years of structural economic change. From this vantage point the experts' fears about the post-Brexit fate of 'the economy' appeared to be speaking somebody else's language, addressing somebody else's interests and providing succour for somebody else's lives. It is, of course, far from straightforward to sell the protection of the status quo to someone when the status quo has given them nothing to believe in. To choose to secure the structure and the well-being of the economy only makes sense if you can genuinely convince yourself that you will be deemed to have earned a stake in its subsequent health. Lots of people, and at least enough to decisively tip the balance, demonstrated with their vote on June 23rd that they did not think that this pay-off would ever be made

available to them. As such, the EU referendum result can be explained, *inter alia*, as a rejection of the political abstraction of 'the economy' as it has been used in the UK for quite some time.

Identifying the 'Left Behind'

My concern is less with trying to pinpoint the single most important variable that captures who voted which way and more with thinking through the implications of the spectacular lack of traction of the Government's campaign around the economy. The main opposition parties all ran with their own tailored message on the economy, but none departed from the Government's core contention that a Brexit shock would be both significant and manifestly painful. David Cameron and George Osborne chose a repeat of the tactics they used in the 2015 General Election campaign, when they made direct appeal to the interests of 'hard-working families' and promised them that in return for their support the Government would continue to ensure that the economy rewards them for their labour market participation. This was always, at best, a disingenuous claim, because throughout the previous five years hard work was increasingly shown to be insufficient insurance on its own against everyday life becoming more precarious. Despite worklessness being far from a pervasive phenomenon and the Cameron Government routinely boasting that there were more jobs within the UK economy than ever before, by the time of the referendum the poorest 20% of households had an annual income of less than £6,000 before tax and benefits (Toynbee and Walker, 2015, p.16). Current projections also suggest that by the end of the present parliament the poorest 40% of the working-age population will be no better off than they were two decades ago (Corlett, 2016, p.31). The dividing line between 'hard-working families' and the 'left behind' has therefore become increasingly fuzzy in recent years. Over what timeframe, then, have people come to identify themselves as having one foot in each of these two camps, and who do they blame when this realisation dawns on them?

The most obvious place to start when working through a list of viable suspects is the presiding Conservative Government itself. After all, protest votes are typically cast against the incumbent, and Cameron and Osborne had certainly given plenty of reasons to attract a vote of this nature. They were the Government's face of the EU referendum campaign, as they had been of the 2015 General Election campaign in which so many promises had been made to 'hard-working families', and they were also the most prominent public figures personally associated with the politics of austerity. However, actual voting patterns lend little support to this particular understanding of culpability. As the Resolution Foundation has shown, there is no clear shape to the relationship between those referendum counting areas that have experienced the most extreme forms of new hardship triggered by post-2010 austerity and the tendency to vote Leave. Rather than living in areas that are getting poorer the quickest, a more likely indicator of such a vote is living in areas that are already objectively the poorest as measured by average hourly wages (Bell, 2016). Reset in this context, it becomes particularly important that a number of local authority areas in the UK have witnessed double-digit falls in median real wages between 1997 and 2015, with fully a sixth of those areas registering some kind of decline (Neville, 2016). What seems to have mattered most, then, is not by how much the standard of living has fallen for the in-work population relative to the national average since 2010, but how difficult it is for the in-work population simply to make ends meet. The 'left behind' are not so much those that sense they have fallen behind most recently as those that have fallen furthest over a more sustained period of time.

Cameron and Osborne could still have been lightning conductors for a protest vote of this nature. It is noticeable, for instance, how quickly Osborne was invited to take a background role when it became

clear that he was in danger of antagonising still further those people for whom his carefully constructed appeals to the need to save ‘the economy’ from Brexit sounded like a description of somebody else’s life. He commissioned Treasury officials to enumerate in straightforward pounds-and-pence terms how difficult it would be outside the European Union to sustain existing luxury spending patterns and the lifestyles of conspicuous consumption associated with them. Yet he was apparently oblivious to the fact that those same numbers were also being paraded in front of people who, come what may in the referendum, had conditions of existence that meant such lives would be forever out of reach.

Lord Cooper, the Conservative peer who, at Cameron’s behest, led the polling activities for the Britain Stronger in Europe campaign, subsequently told the BBC that Osborne’s £4,300 figure for the cost of Brexit to the average British family had to be “humanely phased out”. “[W]e found when we tested the reaction in focus groups,” he explained, “people just rejected it. They didn’t believe it” (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07m8n2j>). As Rick Nye (2016, p.10) has argued: “The longer it took swing voters to perceive the personal economic threats of Brexit, the more stridently they were repeated; and the more stridently they were repeated, the less credibility they seemed to have”. Only one-in-six people in post-referendum polling professed any degree of faith in the £4,300 figure (Skinner, 2016, p.6). It is, after all, very difficult to accept the possibility that things can get so bad as to remove £4,300 from the family’s current spending plans when you are one of the households in the bottom 20% of the income distribution being forced to make do on less than £6,000 per year before a rapidly shrinking benefits system comes into play. And what of the image of being required to scale down the next sumptuous family holiday, or of having to postpone building the new conservatory, or even of being required to eat out in restaurants less frequently in the future? Being told that a careless vote might place some of the nice things in life out of their reach was met with a collective shrug of non-recognition amongst the poorest 40% of the working-age population. Such things had not been in reach when their income started to stagnate, and two decades of that stagnation has done nothing to alter this bare fact.

Many people, therefore, simply did not recognise Osborne’s description of the better life that he claimed only full access to the European single market permits. They have tended to experience globalisation less as a job *displacement* effect (with whole communities being rendered workless as companies have moved offshore) and more as a job *replacement* effect (as new jobs have replaced old ones but pay less relative to median earnings). This has taken away lots of the preceding economic certainties and exposed as hollow the promises of the brave new world that has been created in their stead. Politicians of all mainstream UK parties have typically presented the globalisation of the last thirtysomething years as a largely unequivocal good. Remain Conservatives claimed throughout the referendum campaign that it was this that brought growth to the UK economy, Labour that it brought jobs, and both that the European single market was the local form of the global gift that keeps on giving. Maybe this was true in the aggregate, but it was certainly unlikely to feel that way for anyone who had struggled for the whole of their adult life to find employment that was as meaningful, as secure and as well remunerated as their parents’ generation had experienced. Counting areas where there was a high incidence of this feeling voted substantially for Leave. On its own, the act of rescinding membership of the European Union is unlikely to make good the sense of grievance that helped to bring Brexit about, because the issues run much more deeply than that. But still such feelings of grievance weighed heavily for lots of people when they were faced with their choice at the voting booth.

The 'Let Down' and the Failure of the New Social Contract

The economy in general serves as an integrative function within society, and therefore it is to be expected that any deep-seated process of economic change will disturb the prevailing social settlement. What it means to be a rights-claiming citizen under one accumulation regime is transformed with the move to another, creating new sites for political struggle along the way. This was certainly the case with the overwhelmingly neoliberal UK experience of globalisation. The continued assertion that UK firms were now locked-in to genuinely global competitiveness structures has been used to systematically rethink a transfer payments system of welfare (Berry, 2011, p.71). The social contract has been redrawn in response to presumed new competitiveness realities in a way that tells people that they had to do more to earn the right to access the entitlements of citizenship. Ironically, the mechanism for proving your worth was to pass through the very same labour market that was producing such differential rewards to work and enforcing the pay squeeze for the poorest 40% of the working-age population.

The New Labour period was particularly important to this part of the story, especially its attempts to turn the process of government ever more into one of exhortation. It increasingly conducted itself as if it had reserved the right to advise people on what they should become and, thus, to issue instructions on how best to act (Finlayson, 2003, p.162). In this way the new social contract involved treating poverty as if it was as much about personality as it was about circumstance. The Blair Government's flagship New Deal interventions harnessed the directive capacity of the state within the labour market, but only to enhance welfare recipients' preparedness to take on paid employment (Driver, 2008, p.53). This had the effect of intensifying competition amongst job-seekers and therefore placing downward pressure on wages in low-skilled segments of the labour market. One significant Leave-voting constituency that shows up in all post-referendum polling is comprised of those unable to command significantly more than the lowest legal average annual hourly wage rate under national minimum wage legislation. New Labour's New Deal is an element of why this constituency's pay has been so squeezed for a generation and more.

The exhortatory strategy on which the new social contract has been based moralises enhanced personal autonomy rather than social inclusion (Watson, 2013, p.15). The ideal economic subject is one who can thrive within the labour market and then take this newly acquired independence with them into other economic aspects of their everyday lives. Ruth Levitas (2005, p.157) has described the objective of New Labour policy as "performative inclusion": reminding people of their responsibility to remake themselves in the image of the ideal economic subject if they expected to be able to activate their rights as citizens. Tony Blair (1996) was explicit whilst still in opposition that he would rule out the option of "doing nothing". He addressed the poor directly in saying that they would only be helped if they could prove that they had bought in to a "something-for-something" culture instead. Throughout the thirteen years of Labour Government people were asked to transform themselves into two distinct things if they were to justifiably claim that they had upheld their end of the social contract bargain. Both emphasised the centrality of work to being considered an active member of society. The first was the 'worker-consumer', the subject who works hard to be able to spend the money that propels the economy to ever higher levels of growth. The second was the 'worker-saver-investor', the subject who works hard to be able to put money away that can release them from reliance on the state to cover late-life consumption needs. The 'hard-working families' who never seemed to be far from Cameron's and Osborne's lips are merely the latest rhetorical twist on this theme.

There is, though, one big problem with the continued exhortation to be these ideal-types and to accept personal responsibility if you are unable to live up to their exacting standards. This is that it is all-too-easy to come up short in your attempts to display the prescribed characteristics but through no fault of your own. The segmentation of the UK labour market makes it much more difficult for some people than others to become the successful worker-consumer and the successful worker-saver-investor. Willing that success and complying faithfully with government schemes that try to bring it about is not the same as actually achieving it. You can find a job, work all the hours that are on offer but still struggle to make enough money to get by, especially when you are financially responsible for dependants. Yet still you will have heard new exhortatory voices over the last six years telling you that you have no legitimate claim on existing levels of in-work tax credits. The needs of 'the economy' – there is that phrase as a political abstraction again – means that the books still have to be balanced at your expense and if you object too vocally you are merely trying to reinstate the something-for-nothing culture of the past. For too many failed worker-consumers and failed worker-saver-investors, however, what they really feel they are experiencing is a nothing-for-something reality. That is, they believe in good faith that they have maintained their side of the new social contract bargain but have nothing to show for it insofar as they remain locked-out of the rewards that government exhortation promises.

The imprints of the failed worker-consumer have become increasingly visible in recent years. It was along these lines, for instance, that Zygmunt Bauman explained the looting that accompanied the English city centre riots in the summer of 2011. Cameron responded with a series of bullish speeches about personal morality and about how the legal mechanisms of the state would be used to punish those who consciously opted out of the social norms of law-abiding citizens. Bauman, however, countered with the alternative proposition that the riots were "a mutiny of defective and disqualified consumers" (Bauman, 2011). This picked up on his previous work whereby he insisted that the poor of a consumer society are judged in the first instance – by themselves as much as anyone else – by their inability to act as pristine consumers (Bauman, 2005, p.31). Contrary to Cameron's assumption about the voluntary opting out of society, studies of post-riots court cases have shown that the defendants by no means all matched up to their stereotypical profiling that focused on background risk factors of being unemployed and prone to criminality. The temptations of taking advantage of the free-for-all crossed the boundaries between the out-of-work and the in-work population (Briggs, 2012, p.20). You can be in work and poor, and therefore in work and still be forced to understand yourself as a faulty approximation of the consumer ideal-type.

The imprints of the failed worker-saver-investor are also everywhere to see. New Labour did pilot a number of schemes through which the savings habit might be incentivised by matching government funds. Even then, the small amount of saving being fostered was wholly inadequate to gain access to the types of investment considered a normal expectation amongst society's successful worker-saver-investors. The generational moral panic surrounding restricted access to the housing market is an obvious case in point, with those in low-to-middle income groups now estimated to need on average 22 years of normal savings activity to pay the deposit on a typical first-time buyer home today. The moving target of unaffordability is demonstrated most dramatically by the fact that this compares with only three years in the mid-1990s (Finch, 2016, p.11). If Bauman is right and to be poor in a consumer society is to suffer permanent reminders of the inadequacies that result from being a failed worker-consumer, something very similar can be said of members of today's Generation Rent. For them to be poor in a homeowner society leads to the self-revelation of being an inadequate homeowner and a failed worker-saver-investor.

In these instances – and they are just tip-of-the-iceberg illustrations – the neoliberal social contract that was brought in to accompany globalisation has proved to be eminently fallible. It delivers promises of rewards for self-socialisation to prescribed patterns of behaviour, but there are no assurances that those promises will be made good in practice. As the referendum campaign demonstrated only too readily, ‘the economy’ is an abstraction that regularly populates politicians’ speeches. Yet failures in the actual economy are all-too-often now felt individually as distinctly personal failings. Government exhortation throughout the globalisation era has been complicit in contracting out perceived responsibility to individuals for an economic structure that is unresponsive to many people’s needs and has become disintegrative with respect to society as a whole.

Credibility, Governing Competence and ‘the Economy’

Less than three months after having been presented with the keys to 10 Downing Street and promising to end “burning injustice” (May 2016a), Theresa May has given every indication that she will pursue a so-called Hard Brexit (May 2016b). When previously announcing her run for the Conservative Party leadership, she unceremoniously ditched Osborne’s supposedly sacred budget surplus rule as a prelude to ditching Osborne himself. Yet this does not sound the death knell for the ritual assumption that economic stability is a general interest that the vast majority of people will both recognise and act upon. It merely represents a different way of narrating the path to stability. For Osborne, it passed through spending less than was available to spend through current income alone. For May, it appears to pass through opening up economic spaces that EU policies against ‘unfair’ competition sought to abolish. Such policies were enacted in the name of protecting the single market, but the Hard Brexit currently being discussed implies doing away with a logic of negotiation revolving around a shared level playing field (Morgan, 2016, p.5). Instead, it seems sure to feature multiple concessions designed to provide corporations newly denied direct access to the single market with compensation in the areas of tax, labour laws and wage restraint (Worth, 2016, p.3). This would appear to tie post-Brexit economic conditions to an even more extreme version of those that many Leave voters embraced Brexit to protest against. The political abstraction of ‘the economy’ is therefore alive and well, still identifying successes that everyone should be willing to celebrate on behalf of the nation as a whole, but now finding different ways of ensuring that these will not feel like successes for a great many people.

The merest of backward glances at the last six years is enough to reveal that the families for whom Osborne’s warning of a £4,300 Brexit tax looked like a genuine risk have not been asked to shoulder much of the payment related to the way in which ‘the economy’ has recently informed UK electoral competition. The competence for which Osborne strove so assiduously was decidedly not bought at the cost of the lifestyle of conspicuous consumption of those for whom the highest marginal income tax rate is viewed as an imposition. Competence tests for a Hard Brexit are similarly unlikely to erode these people’s economic status. Instead, the easiest way to purchase corporations’ loyalty in a Hard Brexit era is to drive down their costs. The smart money must surely be on this meaning that firms will be required to spend less on meeting their share of the tax burden, providing their workers with good conditions of employment and paying them a just rate for their labour. The ‘let down’ are being set up to be let down all over again.

The response to the banking crisis that devastated the UK economy during the short-lived Brown Government is a good example of what is likely to recur. Unsure of the scale of the likely knock-on effects, the Brown Government provided something akin to unlimited public insurance of the banking

industry. This was all in the name of enacting a rescue mission for 'the economy' so that instability could be kept to a minimum for the nation as a whole. Yet the reality for lots of people was nothing like this at all. The rescue act in practice diverted unfathomably large sums of money from future public expenditures in an attempt to save a single industry whose faltering balance sheets were evidence of self-induced implosion (Watson, 2009, p.186). The people who worked in that industry, who had frequently enjoyed handsome personal gains from its previous excesses, thus had their livelihoods secured through the sort of government interventions that were deemed inadmissible in any other industry. A glaring disparity comes into view when we contrast the assistance given to the banks and the assistance withheld from, say, the steel industry when major plants were being earmarked for closure at Port Talbot and Redcar. The impression that there was one rule for some and another for everybody else was treated by many as evidence of the rigged economic system overseen by politicians. The Cameron Government, in both its Coalition and purely Conservative manifestations, clearly made matters worse in this regard by altering the structure of the repayments for the bank bailouts from the future to the present. The important point was its choice of who it would require to pay the most, deciding that it should be those who had gained least from the previous riches produced by the banking sector and who were least responsible for its subsequent meltdown. This almost certainly amounts to the biggest regressive distribution in UK economic history, all justified in doing what was right for 'the economy'.

Albeit an extreme example, this is nonetheless indicative of the broader approach to UK economic management in recent years. The pollsters have mirrored the approach by consistently asking their survey respondents who they trust most to run the economy. There is no explicit political content to this question, as it is not who they trust most to do certain specific things. This is a context-free as well as a content-free understanding, encouraging respondents to reify the abstraction of 'the economy' and to act as if the big decisions of fiscal and monetary policy can be reduced to the purely technical issue of who comes across as the most competent policy-maker. Political parties have consequently vied with one another over who has the most credible plans for keeping 'the economy' on track for the best possible growth results. The constant repetition of credibility claims and their sheer political ubiquity makes it even more important not to lose sight of the fact that they are as far from politically neutral as can be imagined. Credibility refers to something specific in economic theory. It means repeatedly sanctioning greater incursions into the social loss function than the median voter would be minded to voluntarily agree to (Forder, 2000, p.19). Put much more simply, it is about consistently saying 'no' to the spending plans that most people in the country would opt for if they were put in charge of economic policy-making. The pattern of ensuing vetoes has been heavily skewed towards taking money away from programmes that would have supplemented the income of those citizens who have done least well out of the specifically neoliberal UK experience of globalisation.

'The economy' (again with the inverted commas) remains something that politicians say must be nurtured so that abstract aggregate numerical indicators of success can help sustain their claims on high office. However, the economy (in plain text) is often experienced as an oppressive force that demands continual downsizing of life chances to ensure that the growth trajectory is kept on track and that the budgetary position remains within manageable parameters. Difficulties arise because outwardly the abstraction and the reality are described using exactly the same word. When politicians in recent decades have invoked 'the economy' in this first sense, they have been largely inattentive to the possibility that their invocations will be decoded in the second sense by a good part of their audience. Almost no awareness has been shown of who these people are and how they have come to think such things. As the outcome of the EU referendum proved, though, there are now lots of

people who would appear to be politically immune to the plea to continue voting for the option through which economic stability might be secured. The exhortation to think of 'the economy' comes across merely as the invitation to vote for further self-sacrifice. It is therefore poignant to think that in rebelling against this common sense and propelling their chosen campaign to victory, certain Leave-voting constituencies might have saddled themselves with a Hard Brexit that will magnify the underlying reasons for their discontent.

Conclusion

Almost thirty years ago now David Sanders, Hugh Ward, David Marsh and Tony Fletcher (1987) provided a new model of economic voting to account for outcomes at UK General Elections. It placed much greater emphasis than had hitherto been the case on the future relative to the present, concentrating in particular on survey respondents' economic expectations and their optimism about short- to medium-term improvements in their material conditions. These quickly became known as feel-good factor variables. So much faith has been placed in them since that time that election watchers have tended to treat subsequent instances in which the predictions of feel-good factor variables fall down as anomalies in need of urgent explanation.

In the months following the referendum the 'left behind' have been most readily identified as the constituency that tipped the scales in favour of the Leave camp. In some of the more moralising commentaries, moreover, they have been blamed for the result, accused of ignoring the realities of feel-good factor politics and lambasted for having voted against their own interests. Yet in reality what the results show is how little is known about the spatial and the sociological characteristics of the feel-good factor and how many people are excluded when appeals to 'the economy' assume that expectations about the future take an undifferentiated form. They might have chosen the option that the experts insisted would be worse for the economy as a whole, but the message they sent collectively was that they were willing to gamble on an unknown future because they simply could not envisage their own prospects getting any worse. These are people who see no reason to feel good about their economic prospects no matter what the headline statistics say. The 'left behind' might therefore be repositioned as the 'let down', consequently being transformed from an economic category with very few rights to a political category with powerful claims on more rights. After all, it has been a political choice to exhort greater work-readiness as both the key to social inclusion and the means of fostering a healthy economy. When people have done all that is asked of them in this regard but then find that the rewards of the new social contract are entirely illusory, they have every justification to feel let down. The vote to leave the European Union on June 23rd was about many things, but for a large number of people it has been their only chance to register just how deeply those feelings now run.

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